

First record of Greater Kestrel *Falco rupicoloides* for Niger and western Africa

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Première mention de la Crécerelle aux yeux blancs *Falco rupicoloides* pour le Niger et l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Des observations de rapaces ont été réalisées par le projet Antilopes Sahélo-Sahariennes dans la future aire protégée de Termit / Tin Toumma, Niger de l'est, depuis 2006. Le Faucon crécerelle *Falco tinnunculus* est le plus commun des petits faucons entre août et mars. La crécerellette *F. naumanni* et le Faucon kobez *F. vespertinus* ont également été recensés. Le 16 février 2009, une Crécerelle aux yeux blancs *F. rupicoloides* a été observée et photographiée pour la première fois en Afrique de l'Ouest. Cette espèce est principalement sédentaire, effectuant parfois quelques déplacements au niveau des zones les plus sèches au sein de son aire de répartition en Afrique orientale et méridionale. La question est de savoir si l'individu observé appartient à une population occidentale inconnue ou s'il s'agit d'une dispersion naturelle à partir de l'Afrique orientale.

The Sahelo-Saharan Antelope project has been working in partnership with the Nigerien government since 2006 to establish a protected area centred around the Termit Massif in eastern Niger. The project team routinely records all birds of prey during monthly monitoring missions to the region.

The majority of small falcons recorded are Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus*, which are seen most frequently in the fossil drainage valleys (dilia) that characterise the main route to Termit from the south. The substrate is sand desert, with *Acacia raddiana* and *Maerua crassifolia* trees scattered thinly but consistently across the landscape. Characteristic resident bird species include Arabian Bustard *Ardeotis arabs*, Nubian Bustard *Neotis nuba*, Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* and Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex*. Common Kestrel observations in the area increase between August and March, peaking in December (Fig. 1). In contrast, Lesser Kestrels *F. naumanni* were seen on three occasions: one on 23 November 2008, two on 6 December 2008 and four on 10 December 2009, whilst two female / immature Red-footed Falcons *F. vespertinus* were observed at separate locations on 20 February 2004.

On 16 February 2009, at 10.00 hrs, TR photographed an unusual kestrel in the dilia of Achetnamou (15°14'25.2"N 10°44'37.5"E) while en route from Termit to Tesker (Figs. 2–3). Subsequent examination of the photographs revealed the clear yellow-white eyes, weakly streaked head and face, lack of a distinct moustachial stripe, and strongly black-barred grey tail with a narrow

white terminal band, all of which are distinctive features of Greater (or White-eyed) Kestrel *F. rupicoloides*.

Greater Kestrel has not previously been recorded anywhere in West Africa (Borrow & Demey 2001). The nearest records are from Ethiopia, on the banks of the Nile at the border between Ethiopia and Sudan (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001) and it seems probable that the species is present in adjacent southern Sudan. Greater Kestrel has a discontinuous distribution and elsewhere occurs in north-west Somalia, south through Kenya and Tanzania and more generally across arid habitats in southern Africa (Brown *et al.* 1982). Ethiopian birds, which, with those from Somalia, belong to the race *fieldi*, are paler in ground colour than the darker and more heavily

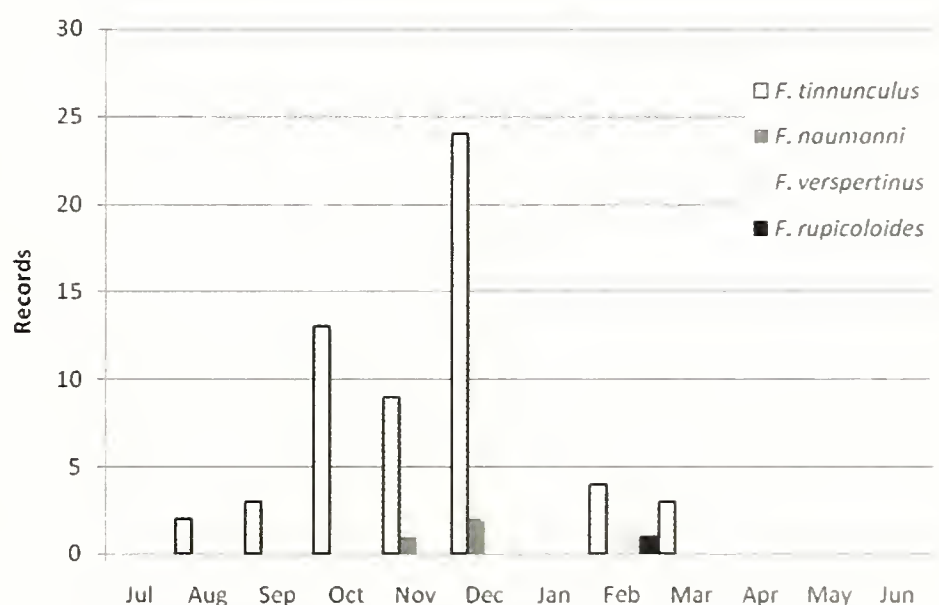


Figure 1. Frequency by month of four kestrel *Falco* species in eastern Niger, in 2006–10.

Fréquence par mois de quatre espèces de faucon *Falco* au Niger de l'est, en 2006–10.



Figures 2–3. Greater Kestrel / Crécerelle aux yeux blancs *Falco rupicoloides*, Termit, Niger, 16 February 2009 (Thomas Rabeil)

barred southern birds. The Termit bird appeared to have paler, lighter barring. This might indicate that it was from the closest part of the known range, but such coloration might also be expected in any bird living in arid and bright environments in which the bird was encountered.

Available data suggest that Greater Kestrel is sedentary or nomadic in different parts of its range (Brown *et al.* 1982). It is considered sedentary in parts of Somalia and the Kenya Rift Valley, for example, but may also appear irregularly in new areas to breed before moving on. In southern Africa it shows 'local nomadic movements' in response to rainfall and the species has also been described as an irruptive or local migrant, with juveniles dispersing from the breeding areas. Elsewhere it is described as nomadic given changeable local

conditions, with 'ringing recoveries indicating some movements of >300 km' (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001).

The bird at Termit was at least 2,500 km from the nearest known population. It appeared to be in good health. Although Niger is a favoured destination for falconers, Greater Kestrel is not known to be used in falconry and it therefore seems unlikely to be an escaped falconer's bird. The species' presence at Termit is surprising, whether the result of an extreme case of natural dispersal or representing a previously overlooked, local West African population. Given the relatively poor coverage of the region to date, either scenario is plausible.

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